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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 001361

SENSITIVE
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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (RI CHANGE)

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [KCRM](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN COUNTERNARCOTICS: NARCO-INSURGENCY
HUB DECIMATED BY AFGHAN AND U.S. FORCES

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR KARL W. EIKENBERRY, REASONS 1.4 (B+D).

11. (C) Summary. Afghan Army commandos and U.S. special forces air-assaulted and seized a large Taliban command center that doubled as a heroin-producing complex in central Helmand on May 19-23. The operation, which included the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA)/National Interdiction Unit (NIU) and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents, accomplished the largest narcotics seizure to date in Afghanistan along with discovery of substantial quantities of war material. Numerous insurgent counter-attacks over three days resulted in 64 insurgents dead. There were no civilian casualties. Nevertheless, President Karzai reportedly tried to stop the operation claiming concern over possible civilian casualties. Afghan and U.S. forces destroyed the seized narcotics and war materials before airlifting out of the area on May 23. The DEA-sponsored NIU took representative samples of the seized narcotics for use as evidence with the intent to continue a criminal investigation of the involved drug trafficking network. Though the raid did not diminish the insurgents' overall control of Nad-e Ali and central Helmand, it reduced their ability in the short term to launch attacks against coalition forces while also taking a big bite out of narco-trafficking revenues. This case suggests that involving more counter-narcotics and security players, including Afghan provincial authorities, in future operations against narco-insurgency centers will lead to more lasting results. End Summary.

Loy Choreh Bazaar: Heroin and Insurgency

12. (C) The target of "Operation Siege Engine" was the Loy Choreh bazaar, an aggregation of shops and farm warehouses at a rural crossroads several kilometers south of Marjeh village in Nad-e Ali district, Helmand province. Nad-e Ali is the richest opium-growing district in Helmand, a province that by itself grew 66 percent of Afghanistan's opium poppy in 2008. Like most of Helmand, Nad-e Ali district was controlled by the narco-militias for years and since July 2008, under insurgent control. The Loy Choreh bazaar served as an opium collection and processing center, with well-supplied labs nearby able to refine raw opium into finished heroin, while doubling as an insurgency command and munitions storage center. According to military sources, Taliban insurgents ran a shadow government and weekly shuras for the Marjeh area

from the Loy Choreh bazaar, which was one of three narcotics bazaars in the Marjeh vicinity. (Note: The northern Helmand town of Musa Qala, recaptured from insurgents by Afghan and U.S. military forces in February 2008, was, with its over 60 heroin labs, an even larger version of Marjeh's combination of narco-production, insurgency base, and Taliban shadow government. In the case of Musa Qala, however, insurgents had several weeks warning to remove the narcotics and weapons before Afghan and U.S. forces swept in.)

Afghan and U.S Participants

13. (C) Following a lengthy planning phase that eventually drew in CNPA/NIU and DEA, Afghan National Army commandos from the 205th Corps and U.S. special forces launched a surprise helicopter-borne attack around 0100 on May 19, when shops and buildings at the Loy Choreh bazaar were closed for the night.

Two Afghan officers from DEA-sponsored NIU along with personnel from DEA's Foreign Deployed Advisory and Support Team (FAST) accompanied the military forces. The U.S.-UK Inter-Agency Operations and Coordinating Center at ISAF contributed targeting information for about a dozen narcotics labs in the area of the bazaar. ISAF's Regional Command-South and UK forces in Helmand were kept updated on planning but did not participate directly in either planning or operations.

Surprise Followed by Counter-Attacks

14. (C) The attack took insurgents and narco-traffickers by surprise. Afghan and U.S. forces occupied the market area and established a perimeter without resistance; but insurgents later counter-attacked dozens of times over the four-day operation, calling in reinforcements from other parts of Helmand and Pakistan. Military sources say 64 insurgents died in the fighting, including several commanders

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and sub-commanders. Insurgent resistance was still stiffening when U.S. special forces called in airstrikes to destroy the narcotics and war material, which had been consolidated in a few buildings, on the last night of the operation before airlifting out. Shaping operations in weeks prior to the assault on Loy Choreh bazaar had destroyed three Russian-made ZPU anti-aircraft systems. (Note: two of these ZPUs may have been used on April 3 against Embassy aircraft supporting the Afghan police's Poppy Eradication Force in eradication operations in central Nad-e Ali.)

Biggest Narcotics Haul Yet

15. (C) Operation Siege Engine accomplished the largest single narcotics seizure in Afghanistan's history: 18,164 kilograms opium; 200 kilograms finished heroin; 90 kilograms morphine; 1000 kilograms hashish; 72,727 kilograms opium poppy seed. The precursor chemicals and materials found and destroyed demonstrated the scale of narcotics production at the Loy Choreh bazaar: 395 gallons acetic anhydride (stored in 55-gallon drums); 20,175 kilograms ammonium chloride; 17,600 kilograms sodium carbonate; 17,600 kilograms soda ash; 1050 kilograms activated charcoal. DEA estimated that, if all the finished heroin along with the opium and morphine found there were processed into heroin, the value would be over 5 million USD in Afghanistan. DEA said the wholesale value in the U.S. could exceed 80 million USD. DEA said no arrests were made during the operation, though CNPA officers gathered evidence that may be used in future cases.

Weapons Ready to Use Against Coalition Forces

16. (C) Afghan and U.S. forces found large amounts of bomb-making and war materials in buildings near the narcotics caches: 27,000 kilograms ammonium nitrate; 700 gallons diesel fuel; 5 40-liter drums pre-primed home-made explosives; six pressure-plate triggers; three improvised explosive device battery systems; 1000 commercial electrical blasting caps;

2000 feet detonating cord; 44 blocks Iranian-made C4 explosive; one anti-personnel mine. Weapons seized included a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) launcher with 16 RPG rounds and 1.5 pounds RPG boosters; 6 82-millimeter mortar rounds; 41 81-millimeter Iranian-made A2 111 A-tube mortar rounds, and 120 tactical ammunition carriers suitable for use as suicide vests. U.S. special forces found two "war rooms" with maps, radios, Russian night vision goggles, and other equipment. Two trucks belonging to the Afghan National Police were apparently being fitted out to carry Vehicle-Borne Explosive Devices.

Karzai Pressures Helmand Governor to Stop Operation

17. (C) The UK Provincial Reconstruction Team in Lashkar Gah and the Helmand governor's office followed the operation closely during all four days, offering updated confirmations that there had been no civilian casualties. Predictably, Taliban broadcasts and web sites claimed civilians had died. The Embassy PRT officer in Lashkar Gah reported local, unsubstantiated claims that despite reassurances that there were no civilian casualties, President Karzai called Helmand governor Gulabuddin Mangal demanding that Mangal stop the operation. Mangal and his security team pushed back against these unfounded accusations and maintained full support for the operation. Mangal and his staff all agree that the foreign elements based in Marja pose a real threat to Lashkar Gah and that operations in Marja must continue to disrupt the insurgent forces.

Comment: Comprehensive Follow-up Needed in Narco-Zones

18. (C) Like the 2008 recapture of Musa Qala, Operation Siege Engine demonstrated the depth of the narcotics-insurgency nexus in southern Afghanistan, where 95 percent of Afghanistan's poppy is cultivated. While this operation will temporarily hurt both the narco-traffickers and insurgents (benefiting U.S. troops moving into the area this summer), even the most successful raid cannot make a permanent difference as long as the Taliban, rather than the Afghan government, controls Nad-e Ali and most of Helmand. Future military operations in narco-zones should include provision for holding territory and delivering comprehensive governance

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and counter-narcotics activities led by provincial government authorities, which were eager to play a part in this operation. Coordinated planning and action by the provincial government and the RC-South-based Combined Joint Inter-Agency Task Force offer the best means of capitalizing on the spectacular success of an assault operation like Siege Engine. End Comment.

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